DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 226 079 UD 022 644

AUTHOR Gordon, Linda W.
TITLE New Data on the Fertility of Southeast Asian Refugees in the United States.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America (San Diego, CA, April 29 - May 1, 1982).
PUB TYPE Statistical Data (110) -- Journal Articles (080) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
JOURNAL CIT Pacific/Asian American Mental Health Research Center Research Review; v2 n1 p3-6 Jan 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age; Asian Americans; *Birth Rate; Demography; Family Structure; *Indochinese; *Population Growth; *Prediction; *Refugees; Sex; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS United States

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the fertility of refugees from Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia residing in the United States. Data are presented from three major sources: (1) a study of births to Southeast Asian women living in Oregon in 1980; (2) a survey performed by the Department of Health and Human Services in 1981; and (3) computer files of the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Preliminary findings discussed indicate that the Southeast Asian refugees entering the United States in recent years have borne children at a rate above replacement level and have an age structure more conducive to high fertility than that of the overall U.S. population. (Author/WAM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED226079

NEW DATA ON THE FERTILITY OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Linda W. Gordon

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ✓ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

UD 022 644

NEW DATA ON THE FERTILITY OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

Linda W. Gordon,
Office of Refugee Resettlement,
Department of Health and Human Services

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, April 29-May 1, 1982, San Diego, California.

BACKGROUND

There is substantial interest in the topic of the contribution of immigration at its current level to the current and future population growth of the United States (see Keely and Kraly, 1978, and Bouvier, 1981). Attention began to focus on immigration in the 1970s as the number of immigrants increased compared with the recent past and the U.S. fertility rate fell. Even though demographic analysis suggests that a stationary population would ultimately be reached under the assumptions of continued below-replacement fertility and varying levels of immigration (Espenshade, Bouvier, and Arthur, 1982), the ultimate size of the stationary population and the path to it are of considerable significance.

This paper examines one component of the contribution of recent immigration to U.S. population growth: the fertility of refugees from Southeast Asia. The number of Southeast Asians in the United States is now approximately 600,000, nearly all of whom have entered since 1975. This makes them one of the largest single categories of recent migrants to the U.S., and information on their current fertility should be useful in predicting population growth in the short and medium term. The research is part of an ongoing effort at the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to estimate the Southeast Asian refugee population of the states and territories as accurately as possible. Because children born to refugees in the U.S. are eligible for certain benefits funded by ORR if their parents are eligible, ascertaining their numbers is of more than academic interest to refugee program officials. The estimated natural increase of the refugee population will be used to adjust the population estimates now in use.

One would expect the fertility of this group of refugees to be relatively high on the basis of their age structure alone: their median age at the time of entry has been consistently in the 20-21 range from 1975 to the present time (a more detailed description follows). Also, anecdotal evidence has suggested a significant number of births among this refugee population. However, almost no direct data on births to this population in the United States have been collected.

RELATED STUDIES

One exception is a study of births to Southeast Asians in Oregon during calendar year 1980 (Oregon Center for Health Statistics, 1981). Through Oregon's vital statistics registration system, all 336 live births to women from Cambodia, Laos,[1] or Vietnam during that year were analyzed. Selected findings are summarized in Table 1. Compared to all women who gave birth in Oregon in the same year, Southeast Asian mothers were one or two years older, had a history of more pregnancies, and had more living children. The greatest contrast appeared with women from Laos, who had on average one more pregnancy and one more living child than Oregon women generally. Vietnamese and Cambodian women had fertility substantially lower than that of the women from Laos, but still higher than that of Oregon women.

The authors of the Oregon study did not attempt to calculate a crude birth rate, citing the difficulty of establishing a base population. The offical ORR estimate of the midyear 1980 Southeast Asian population of Oregon without allowing for U.S. births was approximately 11,000, which would yield a crude birth rate of about 30. This population estimate, if inaccurate, is likely to be on the low side, so the true crude birth rate may have been somewhat lower. A midyear population of 12,000, for example, would yield a crude birth rate of 28.

The fertility differentials shown in the Oregon study indicate that, where the data permit, the three nationality groups should be analyzed separately. That the Lao fertility may be particularly high is indicated by the following comparison. They comprised 27.4 percent of the Southeast Asians registering with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in January 1980 in Oregon but contributed 54.5 percent of the births to Southeast Asians in Oregon in 1980.

A survey performed by the Department of Health and Human Services[2] in August 1981 yielded limited information on birth to refugees as a byproduct. The survey was an analysis of a sample of 2,282 refugee cash assistance cases in nine states, designed to gather information on the composition of the refugee cash assistance caseload. Data were not collected on the country of origin of the refugees; the sample is thought to be primarily but not entirely Southeast Asian. At that time, refugees were eligible for cash assistance if they had been in the United States for no more than three years. Of the total caseload, 5.52 percent of the persons receiving assistance were children born in the U.S. to refugee families. That would imply an annual net increase of 1.8 percent per year if all the cases sampled had been in the country for a full three years. In fact, the median time in the country was 20 months, implying a higher net annual

Table 1.

Selected Data on Southeast Asian Women Who Gave Birth in Oregon in 1980

Mothers	Nationality of Mother			All 1980
	Lao	Vietnamese	Cambodian	Oregon Births
Median age	26	27	26	25
Median number of pregnancies	2.59	1.82	1.75	1.50
Median number of living children	2.17	1.76	1.27	1.17
Total living children as percentage of total pregnancies	90.3%	94.8%	75.2%	not reported
Number of mothers	183	111	42	not reported

Source: Calculated from data reported in Oregon Center for Health Statistics, 1981.

UA 820 A7

growth of approximately 3.3 percent. In this study, the mean number of children per case was 1.53 for the nine states combined. However, Minnesota and Rhode Island, two states with large proportions of persons from Laos, averaged 2.09 and 2.31 children per case respectively.

THE ORR DATA BASE

The rest of the data to be presented come from the data system of the Office of Refugee Resettlement unless otherwise noted. The computer file now contains records on the nearly 600,000 Southeast Asian refugees who have entered the country beginning in 1975, as well as on other refugees. A record containing basic information on each refugee is opened as of the date of entry into the United States, when he/she is seen by a health inspection officer. Information from the basic record is later expanded and checked for accuracy against other records from such agencies as the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration. The older records, particularly for persons who entered between 1976 and 1980, have been constructed from a variety of sources and are more likely to contain missing data fields than are the records for recent entries.

The refugee data files are designed to allow new information to be added to the refugee's file at various times after entry into the country. For example the INS alien registration records for January 1978 through January 1981 have been added as "trailers" to the entry record. In addition, at the time a refugee adjusts his/her immigration status to that of permanent resident alien, he/she completes a form which is forwarded to ORR. That form contains information on the refugee's educational and occupational history, training received, and current household composition. This last piece of information will be ORR's best routine source of data on children born to refugees in the United States. The forms are filed after a minimum period of one year in the country for persons who entered under the Refugee Act of 1980; the waiting period was two years for Southeast Asians who arrived before April 1, 1980. In practice then, ORR will have data on nearly all refugees describing certain aspects of their first one to two years in the United States. This will be a valuable data source for the study of many aspects of refugee adjustment, as well as for the study of fertility.

AGE-SEX STRUCTURE

As indicated previously, the Southeast Asians in the United States are a young population. Before 1975, relatively few had immigrated to this country. Based on INS records of yearly immigraton and the number registering with INS in January 1975, the number in the U.S. was probably no more than 19,000 when the large refugee influx began in May 1975. Therefore, to describe the age-sex structure of the refugee population is essentially to characterize the age-sex structure of the Southeast Asians in the U.S.

The refugees who entered the United States in 1975 had a median age of 20.8. They were nearly evenly divided between men and women, with 50.7 percent being men. About 95 percent were Vietnamese. The refugees who arrived between August 1977 and January 1979 had a median age of 19.9, and 57.6 percent of them were male. By early 1979, the refugee population was about 85 percent Vietnamese, 11 percent Lao, and 4 percent Cambodian. During the 1981 calendar year, the median age of the arriving refugees was 20.3, and 57 percent of them were male. By late 1981, about 67 percent of the Southeast Asians in the United States were Vietnamese, 23 percent Lao, and 10 percent Cambodian. Entry of refugees from Laos peaked in 1980 and has declined since then, in numbers and proportion to the total. Entry of refugees from Cambodia rose greatly in 1981 compared to earlier years, and they continue to be a high proportion of the 1982 arrivals.

The preponderance of males is greatest among persons approaching and in the prime years of family formation. As an example, Table 2 presents the sex ratios by five-year age categories for the refugees who arrived in 1981. From a normal level of 105.7 for children under age 5, the sex ratio climbs to a high of 166.0 for persons aged 15-19, from which it gradually declines. Not until the age category 50-54 does it drop below 100. By contrast, for the U.S. population in 1980, the sex ratio was 104.7 for children under age 5, declining gradually from that level and dropping below 100 at age 25-29.

In summary, Southeast Asian refugees average about 20 years of age at the time they arrive in the United States, younger than the average age of all immigrants, which varied between 25 and 27 in the late 1970s (U.S. Department of Justice, 1980). In recent years, about 57 percent of the new arrivals have been males. About 55 percent of the women in each year's arrivals are between the ages of 15 and 49, and about 38 percent are under age 15. The high sex ratio provides more than enough potential mates for every woman of childbearing age, if marriage were to take place only within the refugee group. In fact, the sex ratio indicates that a large minority of Southeast Asian men will either remain single or find wives outside their own group. The preponderance of young men in the refugee population is thought to result from the dangers inherent in becoming a refugee, through selectivity both in who attempts to escape and in who reaches the refugee camps. Incidentally, the Oregon study showed almost all the refugee mothers to be married at the time of birth.

REFUGEE FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

The available data on the family status of Southeast Asian refugees in the U.S. has not yet been fully analyzed. However, some preliminary findings will be presented here. Refugee families might potentially be described at the time they enter the country or at any later time when data are collected. Refugee family and household composition may be expected to change due to the demographic events common to all families. In ad-

Table 2.

Sex Ratios for Southeast Asian Refugees Arriving in 1981 and for the U.S. Population in 1980, by Five-Year Age Categories

Age Category	Number	Sex Ratios: SE Asian Refugees Who Arrived in 1981	Sex Ratios: U.S. Population as of April 1, 1980[a]
0- 4	14,173	105.7	104.7
5- 9	14,200	117.4	104.6
10-14	14,644	138.1	104.4
15-19	18,131	166.0	103.3
20-24	19,912	159.1	100.1
25-29	15,392	135.3	98.9
30-34	9,120	128.3	97.7
35-39	5,708	131.7	96.6
40-44	3,939	132.4	95.8
45-49	2,762	114.0	94.5
50-54	2,138	96.1	92.3
55-59	1,377	89.0	89.4
60-64	1,202	84.1	86.2
65+	1,638	63.1	67.6
Total	124,336	129.8	94.5

[a]Source: Calculated from U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981, Table 1.

dition, many refugees enter the country to rejoin relatives already here. In such cases the ORR data system would register the entry of a family fragment, while data collected later would show a different family composition.

Of 122,428 Southeast Asians who arrived in 1981, a tally of family status codes showed the following: 17 percent were "heads of households," 9 percent were "spouses," 47 percent were "dependents," 11 percent were "unattached persons," and no family status information was available for 16 percent. These figures should be considered to be rough indicators only, because the coding is transcribed from entries on the refugees' travel records and may not always be reliable or correspond to common American notions of the terms. For example, if two or more related persons are traveling together, the older one is generally coded as "head of household" and the younger as "dependent," even if they are brothers aged 20 and 19. Also, some "spouses" appear to be coded as "dependents." Usually when both spouses are present the husband is coded "head of household," but occasionally the wife is so designated, and if the family contains an older male relative such as a grandfather, he may be called the "head of household" on the travel forms.

REFUGEE FERTILITY

As indicated above, between 37 and 40 percent of the refugees are under age 15 at the time of arrival, an age structure indicating relatively high past fertility. The country of birth of the new arrivals is another general indicator. A number of women have given birth in the refugee camps, so that some of the children show a birthplace in Thailand, Malaysia, or one of the other countries of first asylum or refugee processing. In calendar year 1980, 6 percent of those entering and fully 45 percent of those aged less than 5 were born in those countries. In calendar year 1981, nearly 6 percent of the entering refugees and 41 percent of those under 5 were born in the camps. Without knowing how long the mothers spent in the camps, it is difficult to interpret this information, but it is worth noting. An inspection of the age distribution by single years of the arriving refugees indicates that the cohorts under one year of age are substantially smaller than the cohorts of one- and two-year olds. This may indicate a lower probability of childbirth in the camps than in the home country. It does not indicate an undercount of infants, since all family members are carefully recorded on the travel papers when they leave the camps, and this is double-checked when they are screened at the U.S. ports of entry.

To gain a general impression of the fertility of this population up to the time of entry, child-woman ratios have been calculated for the cohorts entering during each calendar year from 1975 through 1981. Using women aged 15-49 as the base, the ratio was 509 in 1975, 594 for 1976-78 combined,[3] 496 in 1979, 476 in 1980, and 493 in 1981. For comparison, the child-woman ratio for the United States in 1980 was 279,[4] clearly much lower than that for the Southeast Asians. While the overall trend in the child-woman ratio of the entering Southeast Asians is slightly downward over the seven-year period, I am unable to offer any explanation of why that might be so.

The adjustment-of-status forms described above will be of particular value in the study of the fertility of the Southeast Asians, both before and after arrival in the United States. In the hand tabulation of the forms received in September 1981, I focused on data pertinent to the analysis of fertility. Of the 290 forms filed, 69 were for women aged 15 to 49 at the time the form was received.[5] There were 51 Vietnamese women, 18 from Laos, and no Cambodians. The modal year of entry was 1980, with 1978 nearly as common. It was necessary to exclude two of the Lao from the analysis, since their records were not complete.

At the time of entry into the U.S., the 67 women had a median age of 25.7. The mean number of living children per woman was 2.1, and the median was 2. By the time the forms were completed, the mean number of living children per woman had risen to 2.4, while the median was still 2. Differentiating by nationality, the mean number of children at the time of filing was 2.2 for the Vietnamese women and 3.1 for the Lao women, consistent with the findings of the Oregon study of higher fertility among the Lao.

The 67 women had a total of 160 living children, of whom 130 were born in the country of origin of the family, 11 in the refugee camps, and 19 in the United States. If September 1981 is treated as the month in which the forms were completed, the 67 women had spent a total of 1,956 person-months in the U.S. At that rate, the sample had given birth to one surviving child for every 103 person-months, or 8.58 person years, in the U.S. This reasoning tends to underestimate their fertility, since the records report surviving children rather than children ever born, and since the assumption regarding the record date is biased toward overstating time in the United States.

Applying the rate of one child born for every 8.58 person-years lived by women aged 15-49 in the U.S., the 36,170 women in the age category who arrived in 1980 would have had 4,216 children in the first year after arrival. Comparing that figure with the total number of persons arriving in the same year yields an estimated crude birth rate of approximately 28, a figure very close to that indicated by the Oregon study. For a more exact estimation of the fertility of the 1980 entry cohort and other cohorts, further refinement will be necessary. Ideally, the ethnic composition of the sample analyzed should have matched the ethnic composition of the entry cohort; this sample contained no Cambodians while the 1980 entry cohort was about 6 percent Cambodian. With a larger sample, it would have been possible to analyze separately each entry cohort, to see whether a time trend exists independent of the shifts in the ethnic composition of the refugee population.

SUMMARY

This paper is offered as the initial report on what will be a much larger research project. A great deal of data entry and tabulation remain to be done. Eventually, we expect to have data from the adjustment-of-status forms on tens of thousands of Southeast Asian refugee women of childbearing age. With that data base, it will be possible to analyze ethnic differentials, trends over time, and ages of mothers at the time they give birth.

The preliminary findings presented here indicate that the Southeast Asian refugees entering in recent years have borne children at a rate above replacement level and have an age structure more conducive to high fertility than that of the total U.S. population. The short-term outlook, then, is for an added impetus to population growth. However, considerably more analysis of the data on fertility will be necessary.

The assumptions used by several authors in assessing the contribution of immigration to future U.S. population growth (Keely and Kraly, 1978; Bouvier, 1980) incorporate an age structure less conducive to fertility than that which we know characterizes the Southeast Asians. To the extent that the Southeast Asians make up a significant proportion of recent immigration, revised assumptions may be indicated. However, the bulk of the refugee movement from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam may have passed. The peak federal fiscal year was 1980 with 167,000; 1981 saw the arrival of 132,000; and refugees are currently arriving at the rate of 7,000 monthly. If this

downward trend continues, much of the impact of this refugee movement on population growth may have already occurred. In addition, an increasing proportion of the immigration from Southeast Asia may result from family reunifications with persons already here. That development could change the age-sex structure of the arriving Southeast Asian population significantly. Continued monitoring of the demographic characteristics of the arriving refugees is indicated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks are due to Stuart Cohen for his support in computer programming. The points of view expressed in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily represent the policy of the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

NOTES

1. In the Oregon study as in the ORR data to be presented, it is not possible to distinguish H'mong from lowland Lao.

2. The cooperating agencies were the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Management and Budget, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

3. These three years were combined because the total number in the data file for them was 26,400 compared with 94,000 to 150,000 per year in each of the other years.

4. Calculated from U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981, Table 1.

5. The version of the form in use at that time did not contain a date of completion.

REFERENCES

Bouvier, Leon F.
1981 "The impact of immigration on U.S. population size," Population Trends and Public Policy, No. 1. Washington, D.C.: Population Reference Bureau.

Espenshade, Thomas J., Leon F. Bouvier, and W. Brian Arthur
1982 "Immigration and the stable population model," Demography 19(1):125-133.

Keely, Charles B., and Ellen Percy Kraly
1978 "Recent net alien immigration to the United States: its impact on population growth and native fertility," Demography 15(3):267-283.

Oregon Center for Health Statistics
1981 Maternal and Infant Health Characteristics of Oregon's Indochinese Refugees—1980. Oregon State Health Division.

U.S. Bureau of the Census
1981 "Age, sex, race and Spanish origin of the population by regions, divisions, and states: 1980." PC80-S1-1, May.

U.S. Department of Justice. Immigration and Naturalization Service
1980 1978 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.